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## **The Representation of Traditional Culture in Contemporary Art Forms: An Analysis of Indonesian Expanded Cinema Depicting a Magical Pact with a Spirit**

**MADOKA FUKUOKA<sup>1)</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the representation of elements of traditional culture in contemporary art forms by analyzing Indonesian director Garin Nugroho's expanded cinema "*Setan Jawa*" released in 2016. This work is a silent black-and-white film. It requires live performances of sound and music for the presentation. The integration of silent monochrome movies and live performances is a characteristic of the presentation of the work. This idea of presentation derives from two existing art forms: German expressionism and Javanese traditional shadow puppetry.

The work depicts the story of a Javanese traditional spirit belief in which the main protagonist, a poor, young man, decides to make a pact with a spiritual being, the *setan*, for wealth and a luxurious house in order to marry a young aristocratic lady. Despite getting a luxurious house as their new home, the *setan* continues to destroy the house. The young man must repair it constantly, and is ultimately forced to become a pillar of the house after his death. His wife later discovers her husband's pact with the *setan* and asks for forgiveness. However, the *setan* demands her body as compensation.

The exteriorization of the image of the spirits and the magical world is realized by a variety of methods and techniques, such as magic realism, indication of the stylistic structures of the scenes, directions utilizing symbolic metaphors, and the presentation of the dance performances of the protagonists. Through the presentation of the film, Garin Nugroho indicated that these innovative techniques were derived from Javanese traditional culture, including shadow puppetry. Through an analysis of the work, we can see the director's strategies of representation where the elements of traditional Javanese art forms and the innovative techniques of contemporary art forms can be compatible. The director's attempts exemplify the efforts of Indonesian artists to find effective ways of representing elements of traditional culture in contemporary art forms.

**Keywords:** expanded cinema, contemporary art forms, traditional elements, spirit belief, *Setan Jawa*, Jawa, Indonesia, Garin Nugroho

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1) Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University, 1-2, Yamadaoka, Suita, Osaka 567-0871, Japan

## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on the representation of elements of traditional culture in contemporary art forms. Asian contemporary art is produced accordance with the standards of the international contemporary art scene. However, it is simultaneously embedded within the lineage derived from Asian tradition. While meeting the international standards of contemporary art scene, artists have constructed representations that are rooted in their cultural background from various perspectives. The film work by the Indonesian director Garin Nugroho (born in 1961), which I take up in this article, explores the themes of the traditional spiritual world and magical beliefs to emphasize the indigenous elements. Meanwhile, it embodies the innovative representation in various dimensions, such as setting, art and fashion, and the method of presenting images in accordance with the trends of the contemporary art scene. Its presentations in various cities around the world were well received. In July 2019, a public performance was also carried out in Tokyo.

Why would the director adopt such a method of representation of traditional culture? Self-cultural representation in artistic activities should be considered as a process of exploring the expression of the artists that enter into the international contemporary art scene. In the following, I examine an expanded cinema “*Setan Jawa*.” I analyze the characteristics of the work and consider the relationship between the methods and concepts of contemporary art and traditional culture.

## 2. The Work “*Setan Jawa*”

A poor, young man, decides to make a pact with a spiritual being, the *setan*, for wealth and a luxurious house in order to marry a young aristocratic lady. Despite getting a luxurious house as their new home, the *setan* continues to destroy the house. The young man must repair it constantly, and is ultimately forced to become a pillar of the house after his death.

“*Setan Jawa*” by Garin Nugroho, which was released in 2016, explores the pact between a person who is seeking wealth and the spirit, *setan*. In Java, the region as the location of the work, the term *setan* is synonymous with spiritual being. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz discussed Javanese spirit beliefs in his book titled *The Religion of Java*. He classified the spirits into three categories as *memedi*, *lelembut*, and *tujul*, and mentioned a lot of names for spirits including “*setan*.” He positioned these spiritual being as those that “provide for those who believe in their existence a set of ready-made answers to the questions posed by puzzling experiences, symbolic pictographs of the imagination within whose framework even the anomalous seems inevitable” (Geertz 1976: 28).

As will be described later, the spirit, *setan*, in “*Setan Jawa*” is depicted as a male wearing

a deformed mask who loves human woman. In the work, therefore, *setan* appears as the visualized concrete image and resembles a human being with emotions and desires.

The type of this work is called as “expanded cinema.” The work consists of silent black-and-white film and is accompanied by live music performances and sound effects when screened/ staged. Unlike the conventional method of projecting the film onto a single screen in a movie theater, expanded cinema can be presented in a variety of ways, such as using multiple projectors to project images on one or more screens, projecting in a loop, changing the position of projectors during the show, etc. In some cases, it may be presented using the live performance method of processing and manipulating the film during the screening. Reeds positions the movement for expanded vision, including multi-screen films and performances that began in the 1960s and 1970s, as expanded cinema, which was one of the movements of experimental cinema in the United Kingdom (Reeds 2010: 173).

“*Setan Jawa*” is currently projected in the conventional manner with projection to a single screen, but since it is a silent film, it is completed by adding audio elements, such as music and sounds. In that respect, the way of presentation of this work is considered as one of the aforementioned live performance method. Although the video itself is not processed, it is positioned as a live performance, which is carried out by adding audio and other performances to the video. Since its release in 2016, its presentations in various countries, such as Australia, Singapore, and Germany as well as in Indonesia, featured Javanese traditional music, known as “*gamelan*,” in collaboration with western orchestra music. These musical performances were created by a production team that was led by the composers Rahayu Supanggah and Iain Grandage. For the performance in Tokyo in July 2019, a variety of musical compositions, which included Indonesian traditional music and acoustics featuring Japanese female singer KOM\_I, were performed as 3D stereophonic sound that accompanied the video projection. The musical performances were directed by Yasuhiro Morinaga. The chanting of magic spells (*mantra*) were also performed at various scenes and a live dance performance on stage by the main performers in the work accompanied the projection.

Performances where a live musical performance is presented alongside a black-and-white silent film is similar to when narrators or music performances used to accompany silent films before the introduction of talkie sound films around in 1930s. As will be described later, the work “*Setan Jawa*” was inspired partly by the integration of sounds and black-and-white images in Javanese traditional shadow plays. In performances of shadow plays, the world of sounds, which includes music and narrative, has the same important position as the world of visible images<sup>2)</sup>. In that sense, giving autonomy to the world of sounds<sup>3)</sup>, rather than making them subordinate to the image, is a characteristic of the performance method of “*Setan Jawa*.” Garin Nugroho cites two genres as the source of inspiration for this work (Kompas newspaper, February 24, 2017). German expressionism is one of them. The genre’s black-and-white titles such as “*Nosferatu*” (1922) and “*Metropolis*” (1926) are works that influenced

him. In the screening of these films in the 1920s, it was possible to see a fusion with music that was specifically created to suit them<sup>4)</sup>. The visual world of “*Setan Jawa*” reflects the inner expression of people and expressions of anxiety that are characteristic of German expressionist films. Additionally, the plot of “*Nosferatu*” where the female character Maria tried to overshadow the vampire by presenting herself, has some similarities with the plot of “*Setan Jawa*,” in which the heroin tries to destroy *setan*. In the contemporary media situation, where color images are taken for granted, pursuing the world of black-and-white silent images is the result of the influence of early 20<sup>th</sup> century German expressionist films and black-and-white images of Javanese shadow plays. The projection being accompanied by live sounds is also the influence of German expressionism, and also it is considered as the influence of Javanese shadow plays, which will be described below.

The shadow plays or *wayang kulit* in Central Java, which is the birthplace of the director, was another source of inspiration for “*Setan Jawa*.” The puppets in shadow plays are made by engraving and coloring buffalo skin and projecting it onto a screen, such as a cotton cloth. Although the puppets can be colored, the shadows projected on the screen are black-and-white images. Traditionally, coconut oil lamps were used as the light source, but currently electric bulbs are often used. A coconut oil lamp of luminous flame was hung from the top of the screen and the effect of creating a flickering shadow was achieved by shaking the lamp. Therefore, when using a light bulb, the light bulb is usually attached to the lamp shade and it is shaken during the performance. In the performance of shadow plays, the puppeteers are in charge of narration, dialogues, and songs. Also, they direct the performance and give musical instruction to the musicians as well as the manipulation of the puppets. The shadow plays on the screen are fused with the world of live “sound” to complete the performance. The idea of “*Setan Jawa*,” which is completed by performing live music, comes from the performance form of shadow plays. When comparing it to shadow plays, the work “*Setan Jawa*” presents the part of the black-and-white images that corresponds to “shadows.” The main features of this work—which draw from the performance forms of traditional art—are its combination of the one-time-only nature of a live performance with the reproducible media of images and its space of sound where ingenuity can be infinitely given. This live “sound” is expected to

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2) The puppeteers who take charge of the shadow play performance emphasize not only the manipulation of puppets, but also voice acting, such as narration, singing, and declamation. The musical performance of the ensemble, called “*gamelan*,” is not limited to being an accompaniment of the performance. It is also possible to clearly see the stylistic and autonomous structure, such as changes in time-lapse and scenes. Also, shadow plays have evolved under the influence of the changes in media depending on the era. During the 1970s and 1980s, radio and cassette tapes became popular, and at times the recordings of a famous puppeteer’s performance would often be played through the radio-cassette player without actual performances.

3) Kaneko describes that audio tracks, which has a shorter history than video tracks, tend to be subordinate to the video in order to smoothly connect the flow of the story. He also describes an attempt by a filmmaker in the 1950s to make audio independent of video (Kaneko 2017: 27-28). The reason why live performance is emphasized is that audio is presented as an autonomous form of expression rather than being subordinated to video.

4) See Kalinak’s description of music in silent films, including German expressionist films (Kalinak 2010: 48-50).

consist of diverse elements, such as live performances, songs, citations, voices and sound effects, including those that fully utilize technology. This presents the possibility of various sound being used in live performance.

According to the commentary of Sadia Boonstra, the work “*Setan Jawa*” is reflective of magic realism. In the program book of “*Setan Jawa*,” Boonstra describes magic realism as a method of expression that combines real-life stories with unrealistic scenes and images, and this technique is said to have been cultivated by the director’s exposure to the shadow play performances (Boonstra 2019: 8). As will be described below, in the work, various symbols such as Javanese masks are utilized to depict unrealistic scenes and images in the story. The influence of traditional art, including shadow plays, is also evident in terms of the work’s method of expression.

“*Sertan Jawa*” has some similarities with traditional theater in terms of its composition and setting. Various elements of the production, such as its typical scene composition that develop the prologue and the seven chapters, the appearance of clown figures (role of white-faced servants and maids), and the expression of the character’s feelings and situations through dance, resemble the characteristics of shadow plays. Javanese dance is used to depict the inner feelings of humans.

Thus, it becomes apparent that the work’s original idea was based on the director’s cultural experiences of traditional Javanese culture, as is evidenced by its inclusion of various elements of traditional art. These elements were then applied to the live performance method of expanded cinema as a genre of contemporary art in terms of its expression method, composition, presentation method, etc<sup>5)</sup>.

### 3. The Story of “*Setan Jawa*,” Javanese Mysticism, and Spirit Beliefs

While presenting the similarities with shadow plays in terms of the form of performance, the content of the story depicted in the work differs from those of theatrical plays. In shadow plays and dance dramas, it is possible to see a repertoire of stories based on ancient Indian epics or regional legends. However, “*Setan Jawa*” presents a story that consists of magic and spirit belief.

Garin Nugroho uses the words “magic” and “mysticism” almost synonymously in interviews and screening promotions. The two words are also often used synonymously in this film’s advertising and commentary. Mysticism and magical practices coexist in the spiritual

5) Although not mentioned by the director himself, there are some genres of dance drama in Central Java. The presentation style of the film “*Setan Jawa*” is similar to the performances of the dance drama because the actors move ahead with the story by performing dance and acting. In some genres of dance dramas, the narrator is in charge of the dialogue and narration. There is also the genre without the verbal elements. The dance drama for the tourists consists of only the dance, acting, and music in order to entertain tourists, who would not understand the local language or text. The style of dance drama in which the performance is completed by being fused with live “sounds” as in the aforementioned shadow plays also resembles the live performance of expanded cinema.

world of the Javanese and it is difficult to distinguish clearly. Derived from the Arabic word “*batin*,” which means “inner self,” Javanese mysticism is commonly referred to as “*kebatinan*.” It is also called “*kejawen*,” which is derived from “Java”. In his ethnographic article on Javanese mysticism, Sekimoto highlighted that stories of shadow plays based on Indian epics with Javanese embellishment is considered as one of the mythical systems by the followers of *kebatinan*. Additionally, Sekimoto indicated that *kebatinan* developed under the Hindu and Buddhist framework, and that the foundation of the belief dates back to the indigenous Indonesian and Malayo-Polynesian ideas that prevailed before the arrival of the Indian civilization (Sekimoto 1986: 386). Although it contains various elements that are difficult to define as a uniform idea and system of practices, Javanese mysticism is recognized as an extremely “Javanese” (Sekimoto 1986: 386). In the system of ideas and behavioral practice of people, beliefs towards the various powers, such as the power of the gods and protagonists in epic poems, the power of historical figures, the power of the specific things and places, can be observed. A variety of mystic traditions are deeply embedded in people’s lives, alongside religion which is positioned to be official. Fasting and meditation are also practiced. The practices to get close to or to integrate with the gods, the spirit of their ancestors, and the spirit in natural world can be observed. Forests and rivers are the popular locations for meditation. Additionally, the graves of saints and ancestors who are believed to have special powers are also considered as the important sites for meditation. It is believed that the power of saints and ancestors resides not only in their graves but also in their left belongings. Thus the belief towards such things like books and swords can be observed.

The epic world of shadow plays had been dramatized with the above mystical beliefs. The main characters have essential qualities of both gods and humans. They are naturally empowered from birth and receive supernatural weapons from the gods and mysterious powers through meditation. There are many episodes on the mystical issues in the repertoire of the stories of shadow plays<sup>6)</sup>. The performers who are involved in traditional art are also considered the embodiment of mystical powers. The puppeteers of shadow plays and the dancers of masked dances regularly fast and meditate. They pray at the graves of saints who are positioned as the founder of the art forms, and also the graveyards of their ancestors. As a result, these artists are considered to have acquired not just the skills to perform, but also the charismatic power as the performers.

The practice of mysticism by these artists has practically influences in their daily lives. The dancers of masked dance in the north coast of Java, which I have previously researched, talked about the purpose of their training of fasting and meditation with the statements such as “to look young and beautiful on stage.” In this way, it is important that one can exert one’s

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6) The stories and characters of shadow play may become the subject of worship of the *kebatinan* cult. Fukushima cites the practice of a group of *kebatinan* in Kebumen, Central Java, and describes a case in which the clown figure, Semar, of shadow play is the subject of worship (Fukushima 2002: 136-152).



own power as an artist on the stage, but it is also important to develop the mental strength to oppose against the curses and the disturbance by other people during the performances. In the discourses of the artists, mysticism and magic are indicated to be in the same situation. Recounting various cases, such as “I could not move my body during a performance due to the curses from someone,” “the sound of instruments stopped,” and “I felt sick,” etc., the artists emphasize the importance of the ascetic practices of *kebatinan* in order to acquire the power to counter these curses (Fukuoka 2002: 117-121). These statements indicate the situation where the mystical practices and magic, especially curses and sorcery that do harm to others coexist.

On the other hand, in Javanese mysticism, large cults have formed that have claimed a social status comparable to that of official religions. Fukushima cites four denominations, namely the Pangestu, Subud, Sumarah, and Sapta Darma, as nationwide religious communities. Each community has different characteristics. There are those that emphasize practice and those that have a well-established doctrine, and it is difficult to integrate them as a unified system (Fukushima 2002: 107-109). Under the Suharto order (1968-1998), *kebatinan* was not recognized as a “religion” as defined by the state, but was formalized as a category of “belief” (Fukushima 2002: 369-391). In the viewpoint where the belief has the same position with the religion, it is believed that mysticism is a system of doctrine and practices which therefore renders it closer to formal religions and sets it apart from magical beliefs and practices. The formation of large community organizations also demonstrates the link between the legitimacy of authority and the concept of power in mysticism, and it is also emphasized from a social and political perspective. Magical beliefs occupy an important position in the daily life of Javanese people, which overlaps with the aforementioned mystical practices. There are many requests and consultations to the specialist of mysticism called “*dukun*,” and there are several discourses about magical beliefs, ranging from techniques such as fortune telling, treatment of illnesses, and finding lost items, to manipulating the mind of a lover, and bestowing curses.

The magical practice depicted in “*Setan Jawa*” is called “*pesugihan*,” which is derived from the word “*sugih*,” which means wealthy in Javanese language. It is considered to be one of the broadest types of magic, but Geertz positions it as one of the spirit beliefs. In his book titled *The Religion of Java*, Geertz subdivided the religion of the *abangan* peasant class into three subcategories: (1) spirit beliefs, (2) the *slametan* cycles, and (3) system of curing, sorcery, and magic. Magic and sorcery are grouped along with the treatment of illnesses and ritual practices by the curers (Geertz 1976: 86-111). On the other hand, the practice of summoning and making deals with spiritual beings, which is equivalent to *pesugihan*, is considered to be spirit belief (Geertz 1976: 16-29). Along with spirits that frighten people, being possessed by spirits, spirits dwelling in places, and guardian spirits, Geertz gave examples of becoming wealthy by making deals with spirits and summoning a spirit called “*tujul*” (Geertz 1976: 21-23). An example is presented in which people go around to various Hindu ruins that surround a town and get a *tujul* in exchange for the promise of offering a human sacrifice to the ruin’s



spirits every year. In exchange of facing a prolonged painful death, a person with a *tujul* can become rich while alive. *Tujul* is a spirit that steals money and foods from others. It is thought to be a child, and people serve the little rice mush to the *tujul* every evening just as they would to a small child (Geertz 1976: 21-22).

Geertz does not mention the name *pesugihan* here, but it is similar to the aforementioned case of the *tujul*. Garin Nugroho also mentioned *tujul* in an interview and an image titled “*Pesugihan Tujul*” appears in the end credits of “*Setan Jawa*.” There is also a research paper that discusses *pesugihan*, and it mentions the practices of giving offerings such as incense, flowers, food, and bananas to the guardian spirits of a graveyard in the hopes of acquiring wealth. However, the sacrifices offered by the requester of the pacts made with the spirits are not mentioned. Spiritual beings, such as spirits of natural world and guardian spirits of graveyards, are the ones who are approached and negotiated with for wealth in such practices (Mujab 2018).

*Pesugihan* is a type of request of magical contract with spiritual beings. In the definition provided by Geertz, spirit belief is differentiated from sorcery, in which someone asks a sorcerer to being harm to others. However, among such wealth-acquiring magical activities, Geertz also mentioned the technique wherein one transforms into an animal with the help of a sorcerer and captures the money's flow of another person's household (Geertz 1976: 106-111). It is thus difficult to make a clear distinction between sorcery and such magical activities.

In the work “*Setan Jawa*,” the suffering and horrors that result from making a pact with a spirit are emphasized as concrete images. The practice used in the work “*Setan Jawa*” is called “*pesugihan kandang bubrah*,” which stands for “wealth of (in exchange for) a broken house.” A young man made a pact with *setan* to become wealthy and to get the luxurious house to marry with an aristocratic lady. However, the house always falls into disrepair, and the young man has to repair it constantly. After his death, he bears the fate of becoming the pillar of the house. The *pesugihan* in this synopsis is a pact with a spiritual being where the requester makes at great personal cost<sup>7)</sup>.

According to the subtitles at the beginning of the film, the influence of colonial rule is positioned as the background of the spread of *pesugihan*. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *pesugihan* became popular among many people who suffered from poverty due to the industrialization and rapid social change (see 4). According to Boonstra's description, the practice of theosophy was prevalent among many people in Indonesia in the early 20th century, which also bolstered the spread of *pesugihan* (Boonstra 2019: 08)<sup>8)</sup>. Boonstra states that the director was influenced by the popular painter Tjitro Waloejo (1912-1990), who made paintings about *pesugihan* during the 1940s and 1950s (Boonstra 2019: 08). In “*Setan Jawa*,” the main protagonist, Setio,

7) The Javanese *gamelan* music repertoire includes a tune titled “*Kandang Bubrah*.” I asked Javanese artists about the relationship between this tune and the magical practice, but it seems that there is no direct connection.

8) Shirakawa pointed out the dynamic aspects of sorcery that change with the trends of globalized world (Shirakawa 2012: 12-15). The spread of magic in Indonesia under the colonial rule can be considered as the similar phenomenon.

goes to the mystic market or *pasar mistik* and decides to opt for *pesugihan*. In the market, a picture that depicts human pillars supporting a house is used as a catalog. Even in the end credits of the production, images that depict various types of *pesugihan* are presented. It can be considered that the aspect of turning the *pesugihan* practice into a concrete images in the film was greatly influenced by the representation in the visual media including the painting.

In an interview after the performance, Garin Nugroho talked about the rumor that the old home of his parents—here he was born—was built by *pesugihan* and that his friends were afraid of it. The director, who felt frustrated by the circulation of such rumors, said that he took a picture of his parent's home and set it as the location of the aristocratic mansion that appears in the work. He talked about his proposing to the friends to confirm whether he really becomes a pillar after his death (interview after performance on July 2, 2019). *Pesugihan* is a pact with a spirit at the expense of oneself, but as shown by the director's aforementioned statement, people usually circulate rumors to speculate about such pacts, rather than transparent public discussions. Whether the person really becomes a pillar or whether the spirit actually appeared is not a concern for people. Instead, they are willing to believe that a *pesugihan* is responsible for a modest earner's luxurious house or someone's sudden acquisition of wealth. Similar to aforementioned Geertz's arguments, people refer to the existence of spirits as a way of convincingly explaining incomprehensible events and communicate through rumors to derive mutual understanding.

However, in work "*Setan Jawa*," *pesugihan* appears as a clear visual images. The background of how a boy's soul damaged by colonial rule became the spirit, *setan*, is presented in the concrete images. *Setan* appears as a human male figure wearing a mask, and emphasizes the dreadfulness of a deformed shape of the mask. *Setan* is also depicted as an existence that loves and demands the body of a human female, thereby presenting it as an entity with human desires rather than a spiritual being. The scene where *setan* and his followers enter the house and the crabs released by them to destroy various parts of the house are realistically represented through the images. The suffering figure of the protagonist, who chose *pesugihan*, is also depicted. Concrete representation of *pesugihan* through the picture, illustration of the clear image of *setan*, and the depiction of his desire for a human woman are unique features of this work that take advantage of the media of films. The horrific and discomforting feelings that the character experience are further emphasized through the black-and-white visual images that utilizes various objet, such as masks.

#### 4. Structure of "*Setan Jawa*"

The work's structure and synopsis are described below. The film is screened/ presented on stage along with live sounds that complete it. Since the sounds differ in some ways depending on the performance, I will briefly describe the scene composition and synopsis of the film in this section.

Three subtitles in Indonesian and English are projected prior to the film's prologue. The projection of subtitles was one of the typical techniques of early silent movies. The first subtitle conveys that many Indonesians suffered from poverty due to the oppression and new industrialization that were brought about by the Dutch colonial rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second subtitle tells us that many people turned to mysticism in order to survive. Here, "*pesugihan kandang bubrah*" (the art of a broken house) is mentioned. The third subtitle explains that the person who choose *pesugihan* becomes wealthy and receives a luxurious house, but the magical ritual causes the house to repeatedly fall into disrepair and is required to be constantly repaired by the person who did the pact, who becomes a pillar of the house after their death. In the English subtitles, it is also added that on a special Javanese-calendar day, the mystic market opens and gets crowded with people seeking different lives.

Prologue: the damaged soul of a young boy imprisoned during the Dutch colonial era becomes *setan* and dwells in a temple that overlooks the village. The *bulus* (soft-shell turtle) that the boy cherishes appears symbolically here. It also appears frequently in the following scenes.

#### Chapter 1: *Pertemuan Cinta* (The Road of Love)

At the market, Setio—a poor young man who collects palm leaves to make brooms—meets Asih—young aristocratic lady—and secretly falls in love with her. Asih also becomes aware of Setio. In one scene, Setio picks up a hairpin dropped by Asih, puts it in the cloth wrapped around his head, and dances to express his love.

#### Chapter 2: *Misteri Tubuh dan Cinta* (The Mysteries of Body and Love)

Setio brings the hairpin to Asih and asks her to marry him, but her mother stabs the hairpin into Setio's hand and rejects him. After returning home, Setio expresses his grief and anger through dance.

#### Chapter 3: *Pasar Mistik* (The Mystic Market)

Guided by masked dancers, Setio goes into the forest. In the mystic market, he chooses "the magic of the broken house." He is then taken to a sorcerer (an old man with white-painted face) by a female servant, and the procedure is carried out. When he recovers consciousness, he walks alongside old men and monsters into the temple controlled by *Setan*, where he picks up a piece of wood from near the sculptures of Linga and Yoni, which form male and female genitalia.

#### Chapter 4: *Hutang yang Harus Dibayar pada Setan* (Indebted to *Setan*)

Setio makes a mask by carving the piece of wood. The *bulus* (soft-shell turtle) appears next

to him and many gold coins appear around him. Setio, wearing the mask and holding the gold coins, dances with excitement. Setio throws around the gold coins in his house.

#### Chapter 5: *Jalan Gaib Setan: Rumah Selalu Rusak* (Setan's Way: A Broken House)

Asih arrives in a carriage and is greeted by Setio. At the entrance to the mansion, a pavilion (called *pendopo*) of house, there are the *bulus* and a giant masked object. A scene of Asih spending a happy time in the house and spending the night with Setio are depicted, but after that, *setan*'s followers invade the house. The followers release several crabs around the house and they destroy the house by smashing the wall and pillars. Setio puts on the mask and repairs the house. Setio begins to suffer when the servant puts the caught crabs on a fire.

#### Chapter 6: *Takdir?* (Fate?)

When Asih finds Setio, wearing mask and repairing the house, he runs away. In the storeroom of the house, Asih sees the mystic market catalog and laments this discovery. Asih is brought to *Setan*'s temple as she goes for a walk. She offers a dance to request for her husband's liberation, but *setan* demands Asih's body for the compensation. Asih returns home and throws Setio's mask into the fire, but she wails in sorrow when she sees Setio suffering.

#### Chapter 7: *Penyerahan Diri untuk Pengampunan* (Surrender, The Human Way)

While bathing, Asih expresses her grief and anger. She interacts with *setan* when he visits the house, and while hugging him, she pulls out her hairpin and stabs him. As a result, Setio experiences grave agony. After Asih escapes, the hairpin-pierced mask of *setan* is left behind.

The structure of the prologue and the seven chapters described above follows the composition of traditional Javanese theater, which is performed in a multi-scene structure. In the aforementioned shadow plays, the performance is developed in accordance with a typical scene composition. While the structure of traditional plays is also stylistic—consisting of an opening, meetings, preliminary encounters, final battles, closing etc., the structure of the work here is in more plot-dominated composition.

## 5. Main Characters and Motifs

The primary characters and motifs of this work are described below:

### 5-1. Main Characters

**Setio:** the main protagonist's name, Setio, means "honest" in Javanese<sup>9)</sup>. He is an honest young man who makes brooms and dusters with palm leaves. He suffers due to the magical pact that he makes with *setan* in order to marry the aristocratic lady. In the first half of the story, Setio—played by the Javanese dancer Heru Purwanto—expresses his feelings for Asih and also the agony of being rejected for marriage through acting and Javanese dance. In the second half, he puts on a mask to express the joy of earning wealth and the suffering caused due to the compensation he had to pay in his pact with *setan*. This character illustrates to the viewer how honest people enter into the world of spirits and lose their humanity.

**Asih:** In contrast to Setio, Asih is depicted as a symbol of humanity until the end. Asmara Abigail—who plays the role of Asih—is an expert of pole dance and she embodies the behavior and elegant appearance of the Javanese aristocracy. Asih feels distress when she finds out about her husband's pact, but she stands up against *setan*. As expressed in the English title of the final chapter, "human's way," Asih seeks to confront *setan* in a human way until the end. In this work, one can observe some stylistic depiction that emphasize Asih's sensuality too. In contrast to the main protagonist, who loses his humanity due to his pact with *setan*, Asih is depicted as a person who embodies humanity including the dimensions of sensuality and beauty. One of the characteristic elements of this production is to position the main protagonist as someone who loses his humanity in the world of *setan*, and the heroin as someone with rationality that faces the *setan* in the human's way.

**Setan:** As mentioned earlier, the work emphasizes the deformed appearance of *setan*. A deformed mask with scratches is worn by him. *Setan*, played by the Javanese dancer Luluk Ari Prasetyo, embodies the dreadfulness of the mask he wears. On the other hand, he also appears as an entity that is physically vibrant and full of energy.

**Asih's mother:** Asih's mother, played by the Javanese dancer Dorothea Quin, protects her daughter and refuses the marriage proposal of Setio. However, during the entire production, she is positioned as a facilitator of the story along with Asih's grandmother. In the work, there are two scenes where Asih's mother and grandmother perform a dance, but both are constructed in a way that implies the tragic end of the path of the male and female protagonists.

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9) In another production by Garin Nugroho, "*Opera Jawa*," which also depicts Javanese traditional culture, the main protagonist is named as Setiyo, which has the same meaning. "*Setan Jawa*" depicts his suffering due to a deal with *setan*, whereas in "*Opera Jawa*," the main protagonist is set to battle with the villain and eventually kill his wife. It is believed that "honesty" was adopted as the name of the protagonist in both productions because they both explore the unexpected fate of an honest young man who lives his life truthfully.

### 5-2. Main Motifs

The work is set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Setan* is depicted as the damaged soul of a young boy who suffered due to the oppression of the colonial rule. Linking the birth of the dark spirit with Indonesia's bleak past is an important decision, especially considering the historical setting of this work. Additionally, it impresses international audiences by presenting a connection between the traditional magic world and the actual negative history that Indonesia experienced.

Several important symbols appear in this production.

Asih dropped her hairpin at the market, which was found by Setio, who later visited her house to return it and propose marriage. However, Asih's mother stabs his hand with the hairpin and rejects his proposal. Similarly, in the final chapter, Asih pulls a hairpin from her hair and stabs *setan* with it. The hairpin is thus positioned as a symbol of rejection and rupture in this work. It can be said that the image of the deformed and hairpin-pierced mask of *setan* that is presented at the end, is one that effectively shows the final human resistance to the world of *setan*, the spirit.

Masks are utilized to give a visual form to *setan* and his followers. The mask of *setan* has a deformed shape and scratches, and the masks of his followers are ones of demon shape with big noses resemble that of a boar. The main character, Setio, also sculpts his own mask in Chapter 4. He puts the mask on when performing magical rituals and repairing house, and a mask of demon shape with bulging eyes is used. Dancers wearing white masks also appear in the mystic market in Chapter 3. In Chapter 6, Setio suffers when Asih burns his mask. Also, in the final chapter, a mask pierced by a hairpin is left behind as the remains of *setan*. In this manner, the mask is used to represent the spiritual existence of *setan* and the world of magic related to it. Boonstra highlights that the mask signifies the boundary between the world of *setan* and the world of humans (Boonstra 2019:08). Many Javanese performing arts utilize masks to embody characters, abstract existences, and spiritual existences in their stories. Mask are important objet that symbolize the world of spirits. A characteristic of this work is that Javanese masks are prominently used to visualize the spiritual existence of *setan* and make it appear in front of the audience through the concrete shape and image. Many characters with white-painted face also appear. Also, there are characters that use palm brooms as masks to obscure their faces.

In addition to this, *bulus*, a soft-shell turtle and crabs appear in the film. In the prologue, the soft-shell turtle appears as the animal that *setan* had when he was a young boy in the prison. In chapter 4, it appears as a role that brings gold coins. Then, in chapter 5, it appears in the house and scares Asih. Also, in Chapter 5, crabs break into the house together with Setan's followers, smash its walls, and destroy the house. Boonstra positions these creatures as the existence that transcend the boundaries of the two world in the sense that these are amphibious

animals (Boonstra 2019: 08).

Furthermore, the symbols of male and female genitalia—“Linga” and “Yoni,” respectively—that are shown in the temple have an important position in relation to the sensuality depicted in this film. Inside the temple that *setan* resides in, there are sculptures of Linga and Yoni, which are presented when Setio makes a pact with *setan* and when Asih is brought to the temple. These sculptures signify fertility and the union of men and women.

In this work, there are a lot of scenes that capture *setan* and the spiritual beings that surround him performing dances. In the mystic market scene in Chapter 3, various dances are performed by masked spirits. Additionally, dances by the masked spirits or spirits with white-painted faces can be seen in the subsequent rituals that are depicted. In Chapter 5, dancing movements are performed even when *setan* and his followers break into the house. As a whole, *setan* and other spiritual beings act through their dance performances.

Dances by the human characters are also effectively used in various scenes. In Chapter 1, the grandmother performs a Javanese dance near Asih, who is getting her hair done by her mother at an aristocratic hall. The mother then joins the grandmother’s dance. In this dance, one character embodies a male role whereas the other plays a female role. Therefore, this dance is considered to imply the fate of the main couple in the story. After picking up Asih’s hairpin, Setio returns home, wraps a cloth around his head, fastens it with the hairpin, and dances while looking at his reflection in a mirror. This scene expresses Setio’s feelings towards Asih. In Chapter 2, after his marriage proposal is rejected, Setio dances angrily. In Chapter 4, Setio’s overjoyed dance after receiving his wealth signifies his transition from the human world into the world of *setan*. In Chapter 6, the dance of Asih’s anxious mother and grandmother is repeated. Again, the fate of the couple in the story is implied through this dance. There is also a scene in which five of Setan’s female devotees perform a traditional Javanese dance. Thus, a characteristic point of this work is that traditional Javanese dance is used to express the context of the scene and the feelings of the characters<sup>10)</sup>.

## 6. Concert with 3D Stereophonic Sound of 2019

The performance in Tokyo in July 2019, which I attended as an audience, utilized a vast

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10) The film “*Opera Jawa*,” which was presented by Garin Nugroho in 2006, is also based on Javanese traditional art, but it differs from “*Setan Jawa*” in terms of its content and expression. “*Opera Jawa*” uses the ancient Indian epic Ramayana as its theme. It replaces the human relationships of the characters in the film and depicts the story including the perspective of the heroine. The performance includes songs and dialogues in a form in which the actors unfold the story through various actions and dancing. This form follows Javanese dance drama called “*langendriyan*.” It is positioned as an art form that integrates installations using dance, drama, music, songs, fashion, objet, etc. (Aoyama 2010). The theme of “*Setan Jawa*” is magical practice, it is set in the 1920s, and the film is silent and black-and-white. The spiritual world is emphasized more in the film’s content and visual expression. In “*Setan Jawa*,” it is also possible to see elements of stage setting and installations using dance, drama, fashion, and objet. However, its most important characteristic is that it has the potential to be combined with various live performances that deepen its sonic dimensions.



variety of sounds. The performance combined Central Javanese gamelan instruments, a string ensemble, the voice of the singer KOM\_I, string instruments of West-Java, Javanese bamboo instruments and drums, etc. These sound were performed as 3D stereophonic sound. Eighteen large speakers were installed and musicians, singers, and dancers performed in collaboration. I felt that the world of these sounds effectively expressed the emotions of the characters and the context of each scene. The experience of being surrounded by sounds that were coming from multiple directions also greatly impressed audience including me. Additionally, the sound effects of the motions that were depicted in the videos were faithfully inserted.

Yasuhiro Morinaga, who was in charge of music and sound design, wrote about the sounds of rituals that he experienced in Southeast Asia. He mentioned that the singers form a circle and sing, which makes it possible to hear their singing voices from all directions. He also stated that he wants to bring the same experience of “immersing oneself into the story while looking at the screen and listening to the stereophonic sound of speakers from all directions” (Morinaga 2019: 12-13). The importance of stereophonic sound thus originates from the world of ritual sounds in Southeast Asia. Also, in an interview after the performance, he mentioned that he emphasized the power of the voice itself, which makes possible to overcome the language barrier (in a talk after the performance of July 2, 2019).

A characteristic aspect was that in addition to musical performance and stereophonic sounds, the chanting of magic spells (*mantra*) and narration were performed. Morinaga talked about his fieldwork in Indonesia and mentioned that he learned of several magic spells that were designed summon and send away evil spirits across the Javanese region (Morinaga 2019: 14-15). The chanting of magic spells was effectively performed during the 2019 performance. The spell “*Mantra*” that was chanted before the prologue (pre-prologue) is said to summon spirits from each direction. Narration 1 from Chapter 1 introduces the story that can occur to anyone who is dominated by desire. Subsequently, the “*Mantra Pengasih*” (Mantra of Mercy) talks about summoning a spirit. In Chapter 3, the young man Setio chooses *pesugihan* and decides to make a pact with a spirit, and Narration 2 speaks of the choice that would end his life as a human being. In Chapter 4, the “*Mantra Pesugihan*” (Mantra of Wealth), which brings in wealth, is chanted. These spells and narrations were performed by Gunawan Maryanto as the actor and the director in Indonesian avant-garde theater group, Teatre Garasi.

In addition, a dance was performed in parallel with the video projection on stage by Luluk Ari Prasetyo as *Setan*, Heru Purwanto as Setio, and Dorothea Quin as Asih’s mother. The storyteller Gunawan Maryanto and the singer KOM\_I also played roles that can be positioned as a part of the actors / dancers on stage. The parallel performance of several acts on the stage was a characteristic of this performance. Morinaga states that many Asian performing arts were originally a mixture of music, songs, and dances. These elements were combined with a film during the live event (Morinaga 2019: 12). Presenting silent films in a live performance gives autonomy of the world of sound. However, in addition, acting and dance also play an

important role in the performance. This shows the autonomy of live performance, not merely sound.

The performance was part of the international exchange project between Japan and Indonesia and emphasized the collaboration of musicians and artists from both countries. Morinaga mentions the need to expand such collaborations in the future while staying rooted in the land and history, not just at traditional music trade fairs throughout Indonesia (Morinaga 2019: 13). Thus, the performers encouraged discussion among themselves in order to find the sounds that transcended their locality and musicality. As mentioned above, Morinaga also emphasized the importance of local fieldwork (Morinaga 2019: 13).

The collaboration of artists from each region and creation of the sonic landscape of 3D stereophonic sound were effectively realized through the guidance of the aforementioned philosophy. A new world of sounds that differs from the sound world centered on the traditional music of *gamelan* was presented and an opportunity to be surrounded by this sound was realized.



Picture 1: Promotional photo of silent film + 3D sound concert in July 2019

Photo ©Erik Wirasakti, Photo provided by: The Japan Foundation Asia Center



Picture 2: Photo of the performance on July 2, 2019

© bozzo Photo provided by: The Japan Foundation Asia Center

## 7. Conclusion: Innovation of Contemporary Art and Traditional Culture

Garin Nugroho was born in 1961 in the ancient city of Yogyakarta in Central Java. He studied law at the University of Indonesia and later studied filmmaking at the Department of Film Production of Jakarta University of Arts. After finishing his studies in 1985, he started making documentaries and short video clips. To date, he has been presenting a variety of

productions both in his country and abroad, which include productions related to socialism, religion, love stories, and the LGBT community. In addition to creating such pioneering productions, he has also represented traditional Javanese culture through works such as “*Opera Jawa*,” which he produced in 2006, and “*Setan Jawa*,” which is covered in this article. His hometown, Yogyakarta, is the center of royal court culture and traditional culture. It is a tourist destination that receives tourists from all over the world and is also the center of tourism culture and contemporary art. It is especially known as the birthplace of indie activities in the world of Indonesian art, which includes filmmaking. The director is also a role model who leads indie art activities. Productions that emphasize traditional Javanese culture are participated in by many traditional art performers and those who carry out contemporary activities that lead the Indonesian art world at present. At the same time, the specialists who are active in the field of contemporary art are appointed to work in area such as sound, music, art, setting, production, and costumes. In collaboration with various other members of the art community, Nugroho is exploring ways to present elements of traditional culture using contemporary art techniques.

Cohen, the researcher of Asian theater and art, focused on “post-traditional artists” as leading figures in Southeast Asian contemporary art (Cohen 2016: 188-206). He focused on those who were born into a family of traditional artists and grew up among traditional cultural events, but distanced themselves from tradition through public education and experiences abroad. Cohen cites a reflexive attitude towards one’s own tradition as a characteristic of post-traditional artists. According to Cohen, tradition is reconsidered as a site of resistance (Cohen 2016: 188-189). Post-traditional artists consciously use traditional elements and art traditions that have a historical nature to confront the problems of the modern world and express themselves. Although he is not the traditional artist, Garin Nugroho is a Javanese culture expert who grew up in a traditional setting. As the director says, his own cultural experience is in Javanese traditional culture. Shadow plays, dance drama, the world of epics, and the world of magical practice and spirit beliefs are elements that have shaped his cultural experience.

The director has also created a variety of productions that are not related directly to Javanese traditional culture and has received international recognition, which includes numerous awards at international film festivals. The Indonesian film industry is booming because many filmmakers playing an active role in fostering their younger cohort. There are many films in the Indonesian contemporary film landscape that have left their mark on the international film industry, which is consequently transforming the image of Southeast Asia as a former colonial region that embodies tradition. On the other hand, the work “*Setan Jawa*” features the traditional culture of Java and the influence of colonization on the region. In this work, the director creates a visualization of the practice of *pesugihan*, presents image such as the molding of the spirit *setan* as a Javanese-like image, and also involves a production team from the contemporary art world to pursue an artistic method that can be recognized

globally. In particular, “*Setan Jawa*” is performed live, and it is also important to emphasize the one-time-only nature of the performance. Additionally, its combination of the elements in traditional art with video is also unique. Traditional elements associated with Javanese history and culture are presented. These include the use of black-and-white silent videos that explore the magical world, the colonial setting, and the use of traditional dances and masks as signifiers. One could also argue that exoticism is emphasized through the manner in which traditional elements are depicted, such as the presentation of sensual elements in combination with traditional cultural elements. Bringing traditional elements to the forefront emphasizes the mystery of the traditional Javanese culture.

The film works of Garin Nugroho that represent traditional Javanese culture, such as “*Opera Jawa*” and “*Setan Jawa*,” have been highly appreciated internationally, particularly in Western countries. The representation of Javanese culture in the director’s productions has also stirred controversy<sup>11)</sup>. The visual medium of film presents a vivid picture due to the impact of images. The reception of films at international film festivals also has an impact on many people. Film is a medium that greatly influences the image of the culture that is represented on screen. This can be both positive and negative. By visualizing the fantastical elements of traditional art through the power of visual media, it is possible to present traditional culture in a strong light. The productions of director Garin Nugroho, which are Javanese cultural representations, make the most of such visual power. *Setan*, a spiritual existence of Java, appears as clear visual image by using the deformed mask and the dancing suited the appearance. The image arouses the demonic being in other genres, including German expressionist films. While *pesugihan* has been spread through rumors and imaginative tales among people, it is represented as an actual grim fate through the film’s depiction of the house being destroyed and the hero experiencing agony. The mystic market is created using a number of Javanese masks. The emotions of the characters are expressed through Javanese dances.

In an interview, the director pointed out the importance of black-and-white silent film in the digital era and the significance of mysticism in the era of advanced technology. Noting that the influence of mysticism is strongly seen in all artistic styles in Java, including shadow plays, he said, “as technology develops, the boundaries between truth and fiction, visible and invisible, are lost, and mysticism spreads” (Garin Nugroho, interview in 2018). A concrete visual presentation of this mysticism was realized by using contemporary artistic methods. In reference to the use of 3D sound technology, the director stated the following in the program of the performance in Tokyo: “From silent films and shadow plays to modern digital technology, this is an opportunity to celebrate the history and imagination of dramatic art. We celebrate the current Asian art where mysticism and digital technology coexist, and we are

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11) The director's film of 2018, depicting the course of Javanese lengger dancer's life, caused the controversy on the value of the traditional performing art forms. Films as visual medium influence the senses of value on the traditional elements of the subject.

pleased to present ‘*Setan Jawa.*’” (program of performance in Tokyo 2019). He also explained in an Indonesian newspaper article that “*Setan Jawa*,” which focuses on Javanese mysticism, is a “modern phenomenon and an experimental film production” (*Kompas* newspaper February 24, 2017).

Depicting traditional cultural elements in conjunction with innovative modern technology is the director’s unique style of expression. The genre called “expanded cinema” is a method of contemporary art and also a form of expression that is derived from shadow plays. A visual world comparable to German films can be achieved by depicting traditional magic using symbols that are inspired by traditional art. The methods of magic realism, which are derived from Javanese traditional arts including shadow plays, and the symbols of various aspects of traditional culture are also emphasized. “*Setan Jawa*” demonstrates that Javanese traditional culture is one of the source of innovative technique in the contemporary art scene. It emphasizes the coexistence of elements of traditional Javanese culture and the innovation of contemporary art. Such a representation raises doubts about the rivalry between the local expression of Javanese traditional culture and the international standards of contemporary art. Rather than denying traditional culture and complying with international standards, the innovative dimension of contemporary art that derived from traditional culture is highlighted. Although traditional Javanese culture contains a source of innovation for contemporary art, if a shadow play is performed, it will only serve as a conventional representation of traditional art and will not intersect with the standards of the contemporary art scene. Therefore, it is necessary to effectively adopting the elements of traditional culture while simultaneously utilizing the techniques and concepts of contemporary art. Garin Nugroho’s combination of a black-and-white silent film with a live performance is an attempt to represent the elements of traditional culture under the concept and technique of contemporary art. “*Setan Jawa*” illustrated that Asian or Javanese artistic expression can receive positive recognition in the global contemporary art scene. Additionally, it is regarded as a production that demonstrates the impact and nature of the Javanese traditional culture as a source of innovation in contemporary art.

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